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## **Free Legal Assistance as Close as a Keyboard**

*State experimenting with video kiosks to help litigants file forms and get basic advice.*

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When single father Thurman Williams needed help filling out papers in a custody suit recently, he didn't look to his lawyer for help. He walked to a computerized kiosk at the Lamoreaux Justice Center in Orange and started tapping the keys.

As part of a legal experiment, litigants without lawyers across California are using computerized video kiosks to prepare common court filings and seek basic legal advice.

The kiosk used by Williams is part of a statewide effort to cope with a flood of litigants who cannot afford or refuse to hire lawyers. Court officials statewide fear the number of self-represented litigants has reached crisis levels and threatens to clog court calendars.

Like Williams, more than 6,000 Orange County litigants have initiated court actions on I-CAN! kiosks or accessed the programs on the Internet, using home computers. Similar programs are operating in Sacramento, San Diego and Ventura.

A recent study of the kiosks' first 18 months of operation concluded it is too soon to tell if the system will relieve pressure on court calendars. But the report, by UC Irvine's School of Social Ecology, said users were overwhelmingly positive about the free legal assistance.

"It's made life a lot easier for me," Williams said. "It's helped keep me from going to the poorhouse."

The 29-year-old Orange resident was directed to a kiosk in the Lamoreaux Justice Center by court staff. After putting on headphones and following the directions of a videotaped instructor, Williams filled out a quarter-inch stack of paternity and custody documents. The exercise took 20 minutes; it would have cost him about \$800 if he had relied on a lawyer, he said. "It was a lot easier than I thought."

Whether they can't afford a lawyer or just want to save money, more Californians are going to court without a lawyer.

"I'm just amazed at the numbers," said Commissioner Salvador Sarmiento, who hears between 40 and 90 child-support cases a day in Lamoreaux Justice Center. "Eighty

percent of the cases I hear involve people representing themselves. These cases can take 50% longer to process than others."

Sarmiento said the kiosks have put many cases on the fast track.

"Most people who appear before me without attorneys are real nervous," Sarmiento said. "They don't know what to expect and they want to tell me everything. It's an opportunity for them to vent. A lot of what they say is irrelevant. When they go to the kiosks though, I get the information that I need so I can rule."

Of the 4.3 million state residents who find themselves in court each year, more than half are pro per, or self-represented litigants. The phenomenon is particularly evident in family courts, where fewer than 16% of all child- support cases involve parents who are both represented by lawyers. Also, 80% of all domestic-violence cases are handled without lawyers.

The State Bar of California has characterized the trend as "the pro per crisis in family law" and the State Judicial Council has established a task force on the matter.

The Legislature has attempted to address the problem by establishing family- law facilitator offices throughout the state to help litigants in child-support matters. In courts such as Orange County's, the offices have offered workshops for litigants. Classes often have two-month waiting lists.

In Van Nuys, officials last year established the Self-Help Legal Access Center, in which people can seek legal help from computers and volunteers.

I-CAN! Kiosks are in eight locations, including the Orange County district attorney's office, Irvine City Hall and the Fullerton and San Juan Capistrano libraries. However, the busiest location is in the Lamoreaux Justice Center.

At the Family Law Information Center, where open boxes of tissues are displayed as prominently as forms for initiating divorce, custody and child- support proceedings, office assistant Beatrice Contreras said there is often a line of people waiting to use the two machines.

Employing interactive video- and touch-screen technology, the kiosks guide users through the bureaucracy of obtaining domestic-violence restraining orders, establishing child custody, responding to child support and eviction orders, initiating small-claims suits and requesting waivers for legal filing fees.

The kiosks give instructions in English, Spanish and Vietnamese and offer users video tours of court complexes and primers on what to expect during court hearings.

"People like it because they say it's fast and easy and especially because they don't have to pay for an attorney. They really like that," Contreras said.

There still are some bugs in the system. Among users' complaints: the small, immobile keyboards are sometimes difficult to use, and the touch screens have to be tapped in just the right way.

"Mostly it's good comments though," Contreras said. "People will come in here very confused and very sad and not know what to do. Once they work with the computer and finish, you can tell they're not as sad. They're glad that they're getting some help."